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2010

Vernon Ah Kee - sovereign warrior

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Recommended Citation

Jones, Garry: Vernon Ah Kee - sovereign warrior 2010, 46-53.
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whitefella
housefella
strongfella
brick

Vernon Ah Kee *whitefella normal*, 30 second video work for ArtTV in 2002.

Vernon Ah Kee

SOVEREIGN WARRIOR

■ Garry Jones

If I didn't have art as an outlet, I would be angry, really angry, and frustrated. Aboriginal people in this country are angry to varying degrees. Some are very, very angry; some have it on a low simmer; some hardly sense it at all. At different times, I experience all those things.¹

Indigenous academic Aileen Moreton-Robinson has referred to Vernon Ah Kee as a 'sovereign warrior': an Aboriginal artist at war in the 'white postcolonial borderzone' that is contemporary Aboriginal art.² A contemporary artist of national and international distinction, Ah Kee's practice is underpinned by his personal experience as an Aboriginal person from North

Queensland. While he may not have the street fighter reputation of his compatriot Richard Bell, Moreton-Robinson's 'warrior' appellation is appropriate. Ah Kee possesses no less a fighting spirit; one that appears to be driven by deep resentment, and determined to disrupt notions of Aboriginal identity and the classification of Aboriginal art more specifically. However, the relationship between Ah Kee's practice and Indigenous sovereignty is far more ambiguous, particularly in his rhetorical pronouncements on the relative authenticity of 'remote' versus 'urban' Aboriginal people and art.

A founding member of the Brisbane-based proppaNOW artists collective, Ah Kee identifies strongly as an 'urban Aboriginal

does not
assimilate
into other
cultures
very well

▲ Vernon Ah Kee *does not assimilate* 2007, cut vinyl /
digital image, dimensions variable.

Vernon Ah Kee *hang ten/cantchant* 2007/9, ▶
installation view, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane.



artist'. As observed by Robert Leonard³, superficially he appears compelled to broadcast basic, clear, political messages about the Aboriginal experience. However, a more critical reading of his practice reveals that the power of his art lies in the way it negotiates ambiguities, double-binds, and catch 22s, and by the way it shifts the onus back to the (presumably white) viewer, implicating them in its inquiry. For Indigenous audiences, Ah Kee's practice can be seen to offer an example of a strong and self-confident artist, unrestrained in terms of technique and medium, while being inherently contemporary and uncompromisingly political.⁴ Yet, Ah Kee presents challenges to Indigenous audiences also, demanding that they realise and declare their own authenticity rather than playing out roles he argues are determined by the art market – a market dominated by non-Indigenous (white) interests.

Ah Kee has only been exhibiting for a decade now and in some circles is still regarded as an emerging artist. Yet he is possibly one of the country's most controversial contemporary artists. Initially known for his direct and combatant neo-conceptual 'text works', he soon established his credentials as an artist's artist, and a capacity to work across a broad range of mediums and styles, with his elegantly detailed large-scale portraits of past and present relatives (*What is an Aborigine*). His inspired appropriation of a disused industrial toilet block for the 2008 *Sydney Biennale* (*Born in this Skin*), and more recently his inclusion in the 2009 *Venice Biennale* (*CantChant*), demonstrate the breadth of Ah Kee's creative potential and the depth of his political convictions.

Vernon Ah Kee is of the Kuku Yalanji, Yidindji and Gugu Yimidhirr peoples of the Innisfail, Cairns and rainforest regions of North Queensland. He was born in Innisfail where he lived until Eighth Grade, when his family moved to Cairns. He recognised that he had an ability to draw from a young age, and used to lock himself away in his room to practice. He had no real teacher in this area and was largely self-taught – he remembers trawling through bookshops in Innisfail and Cairns as a boy, desperate to find books that would help him learn to draw.⁵

He says that he found inspiration and an opportunity to hone his budding skills in studying and reproducing Spiderman comic illustrations. The association between text and image may not have manifested until years later in art school, however, Ah Kee believes that the study of comic book characters fed directly into his interest in the body and life drawing in particular.⁶

Ah Kee's formal artistic training began in 1986 when he enrolled in a screen-printing course at Cairns TAFE, which led to him being employed as a commercial screen-printer where he had access to all aspects of the trade from design to production, and of course the clean up. After four years in the trade the business went bust, which became the driving force for him to move away from his community to study art in Brisbane.⁷

In the late 1990s Ah Kee undertook formal studies at the Queensland College of Art. As a North Queensland Aboriginal person having spent most of his life under the police-state of

the late premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen, his staunchness was no doubt forged through an acute awareness of the corruption of political institutions and the overtly paternalistic and discriminatory treatment of Indigenous people in that state. He arrived at art school inspired by the race politics and activism of Malcolm X, the 1960s separatist African American leader. He read X's contemporary, James Baldwin, who was also an 'angry, intelligent black man' at war with white (American) society. Inspiration closer to home was found in the writings of the Wiradjuri/Gamilaroi artist and activist Kevin Gilbert. Gilbert's 1973 text *Because A White Man'll Never Do It* provided Ah Kee with a clear and unapologetic summation of the Aboriginal position, politically, historically and socially.⁸

He began to develop and hone his life drawing skills, drawing in pencil and charcoal, and experimenting with pastels as well as pen and ink. However, he was inspired and influenced by other established Queensland Indigenous artists, particularly Richard Bell and Gordon Bennett, whose work incorporated text and images advancing uncompromisingly political attacks on colonial racism and abuse.

Art school introduced him to the history of poster art and Russian Constructivism in which he became fascinated by composition, structure of fonts and text spacing. He also became interested in the more contemporary American neo-conceptual artists who drew on the techniques of the Constructivist movement, in particular Barbara Kruger.⁹ These influences would inspire him to turn away from life drawing and to experiment solely with text compositions. He even started working with a signwriter, which he saw as a logical step in developing his skills in this area¹⁰ leading him to produce two works which signalled an important development in his practice, sustained to this day: *This Man Is ... This Woman Is* (1999) and *He Said - She Said* (1999).

This Man Is ... This Woman Is ..., while superficially building on Richard Bell's *Pigeon Holed* (1992), introduces key themes and devices that continue to mark Ah Kee's practice. The work consists of sixty panels repeating six mug shots, three each of a young Aboriginal woman and a young Aboriginal man (Ah Kee himself), the same image of each repeated but cropped differently. Both characters stare back expressionlessly at the camera, and under each frame is a brief text recalling something of the lives of historical Aboriginal characters and events, although some describe the lives of the subjects themselves. The text references the abuses Aboriginal people have suffered since colonisation.¹¹

Ah Kee's 1999 debut solo exhibition *if i was white* loudly declared the artist's polemic: to challenge racism in Australia by drawing attention to the unquestioned normativeness of *whiteness*. Some of the propositions were: 'If I was white I could buy a bandaid the colour of my own skin. If I was white I could identify with the characters on *Neighbours*.' By turning the tables on his audiences and switching the subjective positions between the viewer and viewed, Ah Kee seeks to make the 'coloniser' feel colonised.

Since graduating from art school Ah Kee has continued to develop and refine his text work practice. He consistently uses Universal font, bolded and in lower case. What is equally

i'm not racist but

▲ Vernon Ah Kee *imnotracistbut* 2003, cut vinyl / digital image, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.

Vernon Ah Kee *wegrewhere/cantchant* 2007/9, ► installation view, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane.



signature about his practice is his consistency in constructing passages of text where words and lines of text run together, rejecting conventions of leading and kerning, but nevertheless leaving nothing to chance. The impact is at times dizzying, requiring a double-take to ensure that you've read it correctly. In many instances the possibility for parallel readings provides the poignancy of the work. *austracism*, is one of his favourite artworks:

austracism encapsulates everything I want to say of Australia's attitude towards 'race'. It speaks more of my own experience growing up in North Queensland than most of my works and it exhibits the right balance of design aesthetic and political content. It also uses humour – an important tool and facility in the Aboriginal critique of Australia's national culture.¹²

The opportunity to develop a 30 second video work for ArtTV in 2002, titled *whitefella normal*, described by Anthony Gardner¹³ as 'a short, sharp stab in the stomach', further articulated his interest in disrupting the ways in which racist values are projected onto Aboriginal people. In Malcolm X-like fashion, Ah Kee challenges his audience 'to perceive the black man's world differently'. *Whitefella normal* consists of a series of rapid-fire portraits of the artist, unsmiling and seemingly impassive. Shot in a combination of black and white frames and colour frames, some have Ah Kee turning to face the camera while most are of him standing front-on, motionless. Gardner observes that Ah Kee's apparent calmness is in stark contrast to the video's crescendo of edits and the lists of words that change with each portrait, anchoring the artist to the characteristics laid out beside him. As the video races through its line up of writing and images Ah Kee's voice intones another statement over the top of the fragmented texts.¹⁴

He states:

If you wish to insert yourself into the black man's world with his history, in his colour and on the level at which you currently perceive him, then know that you will never be anything more than mediocre. You will not be able to involve yourself in the decision-making processes of this land, and you will not have any constructive access to the social and political mechanisms of this land. At times, this land will shake your understanding of the world, confusion will eat away at your sense of humanity, but at least you will feel normal.¹⁵

In 2004 Ah Kee returned to portraiture in the work *Fantasies of the Good*. Consisting of a series of large-scale charcoal drawings of male relatives, which developed out of a study of photographs that his grandmother had carried around in her purse. While he'd seen them since he was young they held no great significance. It wasn't until undertaking research into anthropological depictions of Aboriginal people years later, that he realised the images were reproductions of 19th century photographs taken by the colonial ethnographer Norman Tindale. He was surprised that the images he was familiar with were severely cropped 'mug shots' of the originals, and that the Tindale originals still contained a significant level of clarity and detail.¹⁶

Ah Kee knew nothing about his great-grandparents or of

his grandfather as a young man, so producing these large-scale drawings was a journey of personal discovery as well. The initial project led directly on to an expanded study of living male relatives from his own photos, in which Ah Kee required his sitters to replicate the intense gaze of the subjects in Tindale's original images, a gaze the artist sees as an expression of their resilience and dignity. As his family, the artist is deeply involved with the subjects, carrying connotations of love and intimacy. The act of drawing them on this scale and level of detail affords him a unique level of connectedness no other art-making media can achieve. For Ah Kee, the portraits are a realisation of his efforts to strip away stereotypical images of Aboriginal people and to re-vision his subjects as beautiful and worthy subjects full of depth and complexity.¹⁷

Ah Kee's invitation to audiences to 'perceive the black man's world differently' is developed dramatically in the installation *CantChant*. Created for Brisbane's Institute of Modern Art in 2007 the work was selected for the 2009 *Venice Biennale* as part of the Early Career Artists satellite show: *Once Removed*, curated by Felicity Fenner. *CantChant* confronts white Australian beach culture in the wake of the 2005 Cronulla riots. The title is a sardonic reference to the chanting of (mostly white) rioters: 'we grew here, you flew here', which Ah Kee regards as an insincere excuse for racial violence. *CantChant* can be seen as challenging white Australian beach ideology by making visible the invisibility of Aboriginal sovereignty.¹⁸

Ah Kee says that while Australian audiences get the Cronulla riot references they don't really know how to take it:

What I'm trying to do is get White Australians, who play a role in maintaining the myth of popular culture here in Australia, to question themselves. They don't question themselves. People in power, why should they? Everybody must bend around them.¹⁹

The work has three components: an installation of custom-made surfboards bearing rainforest shield designs; a body of surrounding text works; and a 'surf' video which contains three scenes. The boards, hung vertically with the traditional designs facing the audience as they enter the gallery space, are arranged in a formation which temporarily transforms them into warriors painted and prepared for battle; the viewers potentially the enemy. Once past the warring configuration the audience is confronted by something of a human presence protected behind and within the underside of the boards. What is present however are severely cropped large-scale portraits, most rendering a large single eye as the dominant feature, staring intensely, casting an 'evil eye' on those who have intruded.

On the walls surrounding this installation is an assortment of textworks, which engage the issues at hand in the ways made familiar in Ah Kee's earlier works: they are overtly political as a whole, while politicising the everyday. *hangten* for instance, an institutional reference to popular surf culture and surf fashion, starts to hint at more sinister undercurrents when read in conjunction with other texts such as *your duty is to accommodate me / my duty is to tolerate you*. While *we/grew/here* is a direct reference to the chanting of



▲ **Vernon Ah Kee** *Annie Ah Kee/What is an Aborigine?* 2008
charcoal, crayon and acrylic on canvas, 180 x 240 cm.
The James C. Sourris Collection, Brisbane.

Vernon Ah Kee *whitefella normal*, 30 second video work for
ArtTV in 2002. ▶



the Cronulla rioters, Ah Kee appropriates it as a correction to some fundamental misconception. The sound of gunfire in the neighbouring room, followed shortly by the thumping rhythm of the Warumpi Band's *Stompin Ground*, coalesce to generate a sense of apprehension.

The video is integral to how the larger installation is read. It consists of three separate but interrelated scenes: the bush scene, the beach scene, and the surfing flick. As a looped sequence there is no clear beginning and end. The bush scene starts with a picturesque but largely unremarkable bush landscape – not desert interior and not coastal fringe, possibly a hinterland. Nothing much appears to be happening, it just is. In a flash we are up close to a surfboard, entangled in rusted barbed-wire, suspended in the air. Next, another surfboard barbed-wired to a large burnt out tree stump. Suddenly, the explosion of a gun, then the impact on the surfboard: a gaping hole blown into its pale fragile body. The board recoils in the air unable to fly loose. The other board is also fired upon with its nose blown away. It recoils against the shot but is pulled up fast against its binding. We see the ominous sight of the barrel – long, slender, and black, but we see no hand, and no obvious clue as to who the perpetrator might be.

This scene can be interpreted as a metaphor for colonial violence against Aboriginal people. While the metaphor appears appropriate, what Ah Kee has achieved is far more challenging. At first glance the whiteness of the surfboard is unremarkable (as whiteness tends to be), until it is seen in contrast to the blackness of the tree limb from which it hangs. Suddenly the board is more than the stock standard off the shelf variety, it is a white board and by extension a white body. Correspondingly, the sleek black shaft of the rifle can be read as being attached to a black body.

The tables are turned in a way which unsettles even the most sympathetic audience. The idea of black violence against white Australia is not a concept readily toyed with. This may in part be a legacy of the colonial myth of peaceful settlement. Thomas Keneally's 1972 *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* is the only mainstream narrative that comes to mind that explores this concept. However, in the later film adaptation of Keneally's novel, the character of Jimmy (played by Tom E. Lewis) was nevertheless firmly positioned as a victim. This interpretation seems to sit with Ah Kee's practice of exploiting ambiguities, reversing roles between viewer and viewed, and his desire to make the coloniser feel *Othered*.

Next, the beach scene has three young Aboriginal men arrive at a city beach all decked out in popular beach garb, with shield boards under arm. The Warumpi Band's *Stompin Ground* fires up. The scene is strikingly comic in contrast to the preceding segment; these guys don't quite fit. Is it, as Ah Kee argues, because of a popular perception that Aboriginal people are desert people, remote from the coast and from the mainstream? They seem over-dressed and not quite convincing as 'authentic' surfers. They never enter the water but appear to be on the look-out for something – a bit of 'action' maybe. Except for an initial glimpse of some passing bystanders the beach appears completely empty. In this context Warumpi's *Stompin Ground* lyrics are ambiguous, but

the redemptive sentiment of the song is not lost:

Listen to me, if you wanna know
If you wanna change yourself, I know a place to go
We got a ceremony, I wanna paint your face
Just follow me, just walk this way
Stompin Ground.²⁰

Superficially it can be heard as a challenge, possibly an invitation to the Cronulla rioters, to settle a score, to clarify that misconception about who 'grew' here. But fundamentally the song is embracing and inclusive, an offering to teach and to learn about what it means to be Indigenous; what it means to *grow here*.

The surf scene is a sublime declaration of the *in-placeness* of Indigenous people at the beach and in the mainstream, maintaining their sovereignty while participating in the 21st century. In true surf flick fashion Aboriginal pro-surfer Dale Richards gives a demonstration of his grace and agility in the waves at Surfers Paradise, while demonstrating that Ah Kee's shield boards are the real McCoy. The scene allows the audience some reprieve, an opportunity to share both Ah Kee's and Richards' joy in their contemporary indigeneity, and maybe a sense that experiencing the 'black man's world' isn't necessarily so fraught with danger and apprehension – but not for long. Before we know it we're back in the bush. The video sequence in some ways can be read as corresponding with the degrees of Ah Kee's anger indicated in the opening quote to this essay. He fluctuates between them, but he's not ready just yet to indulge any potential fantasy his audiences might have that reconciliation can be easily achieved.

Provocatively Ah Kee has elaborated on the well-aired proppaNOW catch-cry that 'Aboriginal art is a white thing' and that by producing 'ooga-booga' art and catering to white market desires for the 'authentic', many Aboriginal artists have reduced themselves to neo-colonial clichés. While elsewhere he has suggested that Aboriginal art should be as varied as the lives of contemporary Aboriginal people, he rejects the authenticity of 'traditional' Aboriginal art, contending that it is urban Aboriginal people and their art that is most authentically 'Aboriginal'. However, challenging the authenticity of other Aboriginal people, who have their own cultures, their own histories, and their own relationships to broader Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal society, seems disingenuous. Claims to greater or lesser authenticity based on relative degrees of 'white' influence, whether in peoples' lives or in their art practice, is highly problematic. In the short term it is divisive. In the longer term it seems counter-productive.

Pre-colonisation Aboriginal art could be classified as inter-cultural, with over 60,000 years of sharing and melding of practices between different nations and language groups. Post-colonisation, and particularly over the last four decades, 'Aboriginal art' has become irrevocably inter-cultural, where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal influences meet, compete, and affect new forms of practice. For many Aboriginal people (urban/rural/remote), art-making has provided great social and cultural benefits. It has been the basis of personal and collective pride and self-determination, and has been an important means of reconnecting with, reviving, and

maintaining culture. For some it has delivered great economic returns, while for others it has provided an opportunity to break out of chronic material poverty.

Ah Kee's artistic practice has a valuable role in the discourse that is contemporary Aboriginal art. Asserting the authenticity of urban Aboriginal identities and therefore the authenticity of urban Aboriginal cultural production, connects Ah Kee with a proud history of urban Aboriginal activism, a role that arguably has facilitated enormous developments in the awareness and recognition of Aboriginal rights nationally and internationally. Aboriginal art should be as varied as Aboriginal people, and the political strength of Aboriginal art today may be that it is an expression of contemporary Aboriginal sovereignty in action. ■

1 Quoted in Glenn Barkley, 'Vernon Ah Kee' in *borninthisskin: Vernon Ah Kee*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2009.

2 Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'ChantChant' *ibid.*

3 Robert Leonard, 'Your Call' *ibid.*

4 Glenn Barkley, 'Vernon Ah Kee: whitefella/normal', *Artist Profile*, Summer 2007, St Leonards NSW, 2007:53

5 Rosemary Sorensen 'The Face' in *The Australian* 12 July, 2008.

6 'Born In This Skin' *Message Stick* ABC1, 19 April 2009.

7 Glenn Barkley, 'Vernon Ah Kee' *ibid* note 1.

8 *ibid.*

9 *ibid.*

10 Bruce McLean 'Vernon Ah Kee: Family Portraits' in *Artlines: Art and People*, 2-2007, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, p12.

11 Robert Leonard, 'Your Call' *ibid* note 1.

12 Australia Council for the Arts.

13 Anthony Gardner, 'without a pause, without a breath' *ibid* note 1.

14 *ibid.*

15 <http://www.acmi.net.au/whitefellanormal.aspx>

16 Glenn Barkley, 'Vernon Ah Kee' *ibid* note 1.

17 <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/yours/artists/kee.htm>

18 Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'ChantChant' *ibid* note 1.

19 Australia Council for the Arts, 'Vernon surfs into Venice', in *Arts Yarn Up* Autumn 2009:15.

20 Sam Butcher and George Rrurrumbu, song lyrics to 'Stompin Ground' on *Too Much Humbug*, Warumpi Band, Broome, 1992.



Vernon Ah Kee *wegrewhere / cantchant* 2007/9, Installation views, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane.



Vernon Ah Kee *Cant Chant (Wegrewhere)*, 2007-2009 video (DV PAL), Director: Suzanne Howard, Photography: Ella Condon. Installation at the Ludoteca, Castello, Venice Biennale 2009. Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery.